

Conservation Hotline

FAIR-TRADE PALM FRONDS

The Eco-Palm Project

AT THIS YEAR'S PALM SUNDAY SERVICES IN APRIL, thousands of churchgoers celebrated with sustainably grown, fair-trade palm fronds.

Typically, the jade palm, *Chamaedorea oblongata*, grown in northern Guatemala and southern Mexico, is harvested in ways that threaten rain forests while failing to provide indigenous harvesters with livable incomes. An alliance of fair-trade and conservation organizations—including the Wildlife Conservation Society, forest communities, and church groups—is working to change that. The alliance has pioneered a certification program for palms, similar to fair-trade coffee programs. Last year, working with small communities in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (below, the sorting and stacking of fronds), the group organized a pilot sale of 5,000 palm fronds to 23 churches in the United States. (A “palm pilot,” someone has aptly called it.)

This year, the eco-palm sale expanded to a five-state area in the upper Midwest, coordinated by Dean Current, of the Center for Integrated Natural Resource Management at the University of Minnesota. Current explained, “The palm,

which grows in the shade of the rain forest, is an important source of income for these communities. When palm is overharvested and depleted, the forest is often clear-cut to make way for other sources of profit.”

Proceeds from the eco-palm sale go directly to communities in Sierra Morena in southern Mexico, and Uaxactun and Carmelita in Guatemala. Palm profits have already produced a rich harvest of social benefits: leaf-sorting jobs for women, and books and uniforms for girls attending school for the first time. Newfound prosperity has also attracted fruit and vegetable vendors from other towns, meaning better nutrition for these typically impoverished communities.

RaeLynn Jones Loss, a University of Minnesota graduate student who visited the palm communities in January, described a rich landscape of morning glories, howler monkeys, and brightly-colored birds. Through the eco-palm project, the interdependent denizens of the Maya Biosphere Reserve—human, plant, and animal—are sketching a blueprint for a thriving rain-forest ecosystem.

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